"ANECDOTES OF A BLIND PERSON"

Penny Magazine, Feb. 24, 1838

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at the fairs, dances, and merry-makings; and as his name was already favourably known throughout an extensive range of country, not so much for his fiddling as for various other wonderful achievements as a blind person, be soon had the satisfaction of finding himself ranking with the most popular of the ambulatory fiddlers frequenting any of the neighbouring districts; so that the money he made in his new calling, added to his other small items of income, seemed to bid fair towards ensuring for himself and family a comfortable subsistence.

One of the most remarkable characteristics in J*** W***** was the uncommon retentiveness of his memory. This has already been partly exemplified in the manner he was able to ride through the country, from hamlet to hamlet, and from house to house, alone and unassisted: but after he became a professional attendant at the fairs and merry-makings as a fiddler, many more individuals had opportunities of observing this wonderful tenacity of memory; for a voice that he had once heard he never forgot; and being (principally in consideration of his bereavement) a general favourite, most of the young men (and many of the maidens too) used to make kind inquiries after his health, on which occasions he invariably asked their names, and never afterwards forgot them, no matter where or under what circumstances they chanced to meet.

In many parts of the north the ancient custom of itinerant musicians perambulating the country a little before Christmas commences is still kept up. They journey

river. This little adventure certainly had the effect of preventing him from completing his ordinary circuit that night—or, rather, morning; for having lost his hat in his anxiety to save his fiddle, and being thoroughly drenched, he found it necessary to hurry homewards by the nearest route in order to escape from the ill effects of the intense cold.

But this little misadventure was far from cooling his musical ardour; since about the same hour on the night following he was at the identical same place, and fording the treacherous stepping-stones. But on this occasion he was *alone;* for as his companion had neglected his duty in making him acquainted with the difficulty on the previous night, he had given him to understand that for the future he should dispense with his attendance. After this occurrence took place, this extraordinary person continued to perform his nightly long and rough journeys *alone;* and which he undertook for several succeeding winters;—and respecting which he has often been heard to declare, that upon the whole he was much better off without a companion; for having so many rude stiles and fences without stiles to climb over, he found there was a considerable saving of time when not incommoded by a useless attendant.

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and their little blind son was received into the family of his paternal grandfather, where he continued to reside until he grew up to manhood. During this period no attempts were made to impart to him any useful knowledge; for in that part of the country there were then no institutions for the education of the blind. Such being the case, the only active employment he engaged in was that of lending a helping-hand wherever he could assist in the duties attendant upon the management of his grandfather's farm. While a mere youth, he was con-

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In a small village in one of the northern counties of England there resides a man of the name of J*** W*****, who at present is between thirty and forty years of age. When he was a little boy, he had the misfortune to become totally deprived of sight, though not before he had been a short period at school, where he had learned a little of both reading and writing, being considered a child of remarkably quick parts. His parents, who owned and occupied a small farm, both died about this time, and their little blind son was received into the family of his paternal grandfather, where he continued to reside until he grew up to manhood. During this period no attempts were made to impart to him any useful knowledge; for in that part of the country there were then no institutions for the education of the blind. Such being the case, the only active employment he engaged in was that of lending a helping-hand wherever he could assist in the duties attendant upon the management of his grandfather's farm. While a mere youth, he was considered a sort of prodigy by his neighbours and acquaintances; for he not only attempted many things that seemed far beyond the reach of persons labouring under the severe affliction with which he was visited, but he often actually succeeded where others failed who enjoyed the full possession of all their faculties.

Amongst his youthful predilections was that of music, and in this respect he was by no means singular; since it is generally remarked that the solace of sweet sounds has peculiar charms for most persons labouring under blindness. Accordingly a violin was procured for the poor boy, who without any aid or instructions soon made such proficiency in the musical art, that the name of J*** W***** was placed upon the already long list of "blind fiddlers."

When he attained the age of twenty-one he came into the possession of the small farm that had belonged to his father; and notwithstanding that his nearest and best friends advised him to rent it out to some one, and live upon the proceeds (limited as they necessarily must be), and not incommode and trouble himself with its management,—he unfortunately was deaf to good advice, and actually entered upon his patrimony at the term subsequent to his coming of age. Although, as has already been observed, he was remarkably active and intelligent for a person in his melancholy condition (for the loss of sight under all circumstances places a person in a melancholy condition), yet when he took upon himself the management of his own farm it soon became apparent that he would have farmed better, and more profitably, had he possessed his eyesight. Several of his performances were, nevertheless, quite marvellous,—for with a pair of steady horses he was able to make pretty good work as a ploughman, and it was not unusual to see him driving his cart to mill or market. But his labours were not confined to the ploughing and tilling of his ground; for in the time of harvest he might be seen mowing his grass, or with a sickle cutting down his oats and barley. Shortly after he commenced farming on his own account he entered into the marriage state; and at the present time he is the father of a family. But although he became possessed of a helpmate, his pecuniary prospects were far from improving; yet before he became irretrievably involved in difficulties, he gave up farming to those who could better *see* how to manage it. Having disposed of his property, he then rented a small house that stood by the side of the high-road leading through the village; and being bent upon doing something for a livelihood, he procured a license under the (then) recently-passed act for retailing beer upon the premises, and accordingly opened a beer-shop. But as the remote and out-of-the-way situation of the village precluded the possibility of his doing much business in that line, he turned his attention to dealing in horses (for which he had always shown an inclination), and frequented the fairs and markets all through the country. His friends attempted to dissuade him from embarking in a business that obviously required the possession of all the senses—and particularly that of seeing; but their remonstrances were again ineffectual. It must be admitted, however, that he was more of an adept than his friends had imagined; for on many occasions he would return from the markets with a more valuable horse than he had set out with—besides a few extra sovereigns in his purse, which he had realized by his various tradings and exchangings. It was very remarkable, too, that

in all his dealings and traffickings among horses he never met with any accident nor was he ever robbed of the smallest sum of money.

Not among the least surprising feats of "Blind J***," (as his neighbours and acquaintances familiarly called him), were the adroitness and accuracy displayed by him in finding out the bye-roads, gates, and dim paths leading to many of the secluded farm-houses in the mountainous and thinly-inhabited district where he resided. The writer of this article, who knew him in his infancy, and still knows him well, has many times had the curiosity to watch his motions when travelling through the lanes and meadows; and the result has always been an increased astonishment at the accuracy with which the sightless equestrian would quit the main road,—force his horse up to some gate he wished to open,—unlatch the gate with apparent facility,—and then continue his route amongst the various turnings and windings, until he arrived at the door of the farm-house he was intending to visit. All this would have been the less surprising had he been mounted upon some old and staid animal to which the lanes and paths were mostly familiar; but this by no means was the case, since, from his constant dealings in horses, he rarely made two excursions with the same animal. He was likewise noted for the breaking-in of young horses; not only on his own account, but for any of his neighbours that ehose to employ him in this way; and what is very extraordinary, he never met with the slightest accident to himself or the horses under his charge; nor failed in subduing the most vicious tempers, nor of rendering them as tractable and gentle as it was possible for them to become.

Notwithstanding that he had calculated upou considerable profits from his beer-retailing establishment, as well as something in addition from his trading in horses, yet he could not hide from himself the disagreeable certainty that he was yearly becoming poorer and more narrowed in his circumstances. He therefore came to the resolution of making the most of his musical talents; so that that which had hitherto been practised as an amusement should henceforward become a source of emolument. Such being his determination, it soon became blazoned abroad that "Blind J***" would feel much obliged to the inn and public-house keepers in the surrounding country-towns and villages, if they would patronise him at the fairs, dances, and merry-makings; and as his name was already favourably known throughout an extensive range of country, not so much for his fiddling as for various other wonderful achievements as a blind person, he soon had the satisfaction of finding himself ranking with the most popular of the ambulatory fiddlers frequenting any of the neighbouring districts; so that the money he made in his new calling, added to his other small items of income, seemed to bid fair towards ensuring for himself and family a comfortable subsistence.

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In many parts of the north the ancient custom of itinerant musicians perambulating the country a little before Christmas commences is still kept up. They journey from house to house, playing some familiar air before the doors or the windows of the rural dwellings, addressing by name the several members of each family, and wishing them a "good night," or a "good morning," as the case may happen to be. In this way they continue these nocturnal visits until Christmas begins; when laying aside their instruments, they perform the same journey by day, when it is expected that every householder will contribute his mite; for it would be considered unpardonable to refuse a trifle to the "poor thwaites," as these itinerant minstrels are called. When the subject of these remarks had become a professional performer at the fairs, &c., he undertook to traverse by night a wide and wild district, for the part of the country wherein he resided was mountainous and scantily inhabited. Being a total stranger to many of the fell-side farm-houses, he considered it necessary to have a companion in these nightly excursions, with whom he agreed to divide whatever money they should collect at the end of the season, although his guide happened to be non-musical. The season was a remarkably severe one, and the musician and his conduetor were frequently exposed to severe frosts and storms of drifting snow. One night, when the frost was more intense than usual, and when the poor fellows were near the extreme limits of their nightly wanderings, about four or five miles from home, they reached the side of a rather small but rapid stream, across which they had to find their way by means of a score of pretty large but somewhat irregular stepping-stones. It was the guide's duty to venture over first, and explain to his sightless superior if there were any new or peculiar difficulties; and then the musician and his violin (for he would not intrust it to the care of another), aided by a long and stout staff, undertook to pass over. It appeared, however, on the night in question, that the guide had neglected to inform J*** W***** that the surface of one of the stepping-stones was incrusted with slippery ice, and the consequence was that the unsuspecting and courageous fiddler, having fearlessly placed his foot upon the treacherous stone, off it slid before he had time to recover the false step, and the next moment he found himself plunging in the rapid current. His presence of mind, however, did not forsake him; for although he momentarily lost his footing, he managed to hold his violin high above the surface of the half-frozen river. This little adventure certainly had the effect of preventing him from completing his ordinary circuit that night—or, rather, morning; for having lost his hat in his anxiety to save his fiddle, and being thoroughly drenched, he found it necessary to hurry homewards by the nearest route in order to escape from the ill effects of the intense cold.

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